

Exploring Craters of the Moon by the Loop Road

Craters of the Moon National Monument encompasses more than 750,000 acres. What at first appears monotonous is really a landscape full of detail and surprises. This guide to selected features helps you see the monument at your own pace. The larger story unfolds as you tour the loop road.

1 Visitor Center Begin at the visitor center. Here you will find publications, maps, and a bookstore. Check activity schedules for ranger-led walks and evening programs. Rangers can answer questions and help you plan your visit.

The seven-mile loop road takes you deeper into Craters of the Moon's scenic attractions. Side trips lead to points two through seven. Most of the drive is one way. Spur roads and trailheads help you explore the monument even further. The trails invite foot travel. You can make the drive, including several short walks, in about two hours.

2 North Crater Flow At this stop a short trail crosses the flow to a group of monoliths or crater wall fragments transported by lava flows. This flow is one of the youngest and here the Triple Twist Tree suggests, because of its 1,350 growth rings, that these eruptions ceased only 2,000 years ago. You will see fine examples of ropy pāhoehoe lava and block lava on North Crater Flow. Up the road is North Crater Trail. Take this longer, steep trail to peer into the vent of a volcano.

3 Devils Orchard On the east side, after the road skirts Paisley Cone, is Devils Orchard. This group of lava fragments stands like islands in a sea of cinders. A short spur road leads to a self-guiding trail through these weird features. As you walk this ½-mile trail, you will see how people have had an impact on this lava landscape and how it is being protected today. This barrier-free trail is designed to be accessible to all people.

4 Inferno Cone Viewpoint A volcanic landscape of cinder cones spreads before you to the distant mountain ranges. Cool moist north slopes of the cones have noticeably more vegetation than the drier south slopes. From the summit of Inferno Cone—a short, steep walk—you can recognize the chain of cinder cones along the Great Rift Zone.

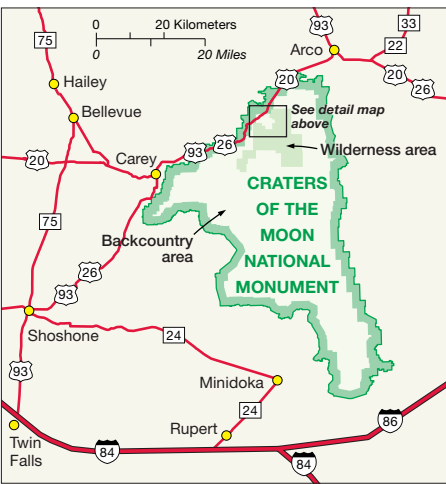
Big Cinder Butte to the south towers above the lava plain in the distance. This is one of the largest purely basaltic cinder cones in the world.

5 Big Craters and Spatter Cones Area Spatter cones formed along the Great Rift fissure where clots of pasty lava stuck together when they fell. The material and forces of these eruptions originated at depths of nearly 37 miles within the Earth. To protect these fragile volcanic features, you are required to stay on trails in this area.

6 Trails to Tree Molds and Wilderness A spur road just beyond Inferno Cone takes you to trails that lead to the Tree Molds Area, Trench Mortar Flat, and the Craters of the Moon Wilderness area. Tree molds formed where molten lava flows encased trees and then hardened. The cylindrical molds that remained after the wood rotted away range from a few inches to just under three feet in diameter.

7 Cave Area At this last stop on the loop road take a ½-mile walk to the lava tubes and see Dewdrop, Boy Scout, Beauty, and Indian Tunnel. These are natural, wild caves, and exploring them can be hazardous. There are no developed pathways or handrails. Except in Indian Tunnel, you must carry flashlights and extra batteries. The caves have low ceilings, sharp projectiles, and loose rocks. Ask a ranger about safety precautions. **Warning**—especially hazardous sections of the caves are marked with signs or barriers. For your safety, stay out of these areas.

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Developed Area (see large map above) The visitor center is 18 miles southwest of Arco, Idaho, on U.S. 20/26/93. The area has a campground, rest-rooms, self-guiding trails, and activities.

Wilderness Area The wilderness area is managed to preserve its primitive character. A special permit (free at the visitor center) is required for staying overnight.

Backcountry Area Explorers here will find conditions hot and dry in summer and cold and snowy in winter. Many roads do not have signs, and most are not maintained. Backcountry visitors must have properly equipped, high-clearance vehicles with good tires. *Passenger vehicles are not recommended.* Get safety and travel tips, detailed maps, and road conditions at NPS or BLM offices.